

WHAT PRICE FREEDOM?

JAMES BALDWIN

PART OF THE PRICE that Americans have paid for delusion, part of what we have done to ourselves, was given to us in Dallas, Texas. This happened in a civilized nation, the country which is the moral leader of the free world, when some lunatic blew off the President's head. Now, I want to suggest something, and I don't want to sound rude, but we all know that it has been many generations and it hasn't stopped yet that black men's heads have been blown off—and nobody cared. Because, as I said before, it wasn't happening to a person, it was happening to a "nigger."

We all know that this country prides itself in something it calls "upward mobility." "Upward mobility" means, among other things, other sinister things, that if you were born a poor boy, say you are born in the ghetto, or in the back woods someplace, or in Sicily, and you can't speak English very well yet, it means that if you work hard and save your pennies and be a good boy—or know how to be a bad boy—you can get to be a junior executive by the time you are thirty. That is what "upward mobility" means and that is *all* it means. It does not apply, of course, to one-tenth of the population. A black boy born in the back woods and a black boy born in the ghetto knows he is not going to get out of the ghetto by saving his pennies and being a nice boy. Now if I am imprisoned in the ghetto, somebody is keeping me there. I can't walk out because of the warden. There are two people you always find in prison: the man in the prison and the man who is keeping him there. I, as the prisoner, have a terrible advantage since I have to understand by the time I am twelve the nature of the prison and *your* nature, since you are my warden and then I have to figure out how to outwit you and how to lick you and I do, and I manage, very often anyway, to survive all your prisons, but you the wardens, have not. If we in this country had a stronger grasp of reality and when I say reality I mean

Speech before the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Conference on Food and Freedom, Washington, D. C. (Nov. 1963.)

the reality of another human being—another human being! If we have not lost that, then the assassination of Medgar Evers would have aroused the country *then*.

He was a father; he had a wife; he had children, he was an American! He was also killed, we are told, by a lunatic. I am suspicious of these "lunatics" who crop up in the most inconvenient or convenient times and places. In any case, I don't care what hand pulled the trigger; he was put to death by the same oligarchy who still intend, with the country's help, to keep the Negro in his place. That is why he died and that is why nobody cared.

Six kids were murdered in Birmingham on a Sunday and in Sunday school in a Christian nation, and nobody cared. And because nobody cared *then* we are in this trouble *now*; because the forces which we have allowed to take over in this country also killed poor President Kennedy and not because—let us tell the truth—not because he had turned into John Brown and not because he was a great civil rights leader. Let's not be so pious as to make a myth out of what we *know*. He died for a very simple and also very complex reason, and when one examines the reason we are seeing something that all of our communications systems deny. What he did was break the bargain the country had struck around the turn of the century, when we agreed in the North that we would do what we wanted to with "our niggers" and in the South you would do what you wanted with "your niggers." That is what created the "Solid South," and he broke the bargain, poor man. When James Foreman talks about "One Man, One Vote," if we really should achieve one man, one vote, that is the end of the Southern oligarchy and that really is also the end of the Democratic Party as we now know it.

That fact suggests to me some of the dimensions of the crisis which we now face. How can I put this? I was trying to suggest before that what the country has done to one-tenth of its citizens has had a disastrous effect on the country. It is obvious, or maybe it is not so obvious, as it seems to be a controversial point, but it seems to me obvious that if you are intending to establish, to live in, to create a democracy, then you have a responsibility to all of your citizens. It would seem obvious to me that any son, any native son or daughter, has all the rights that any other native son or daughter has.

It's bad enough for this not to be so; that's bad enough. But what is really much worse is the system of lies, evasions and naked oppression designed to pretend this isn't so. It is one thing to trample a kid half to death or to death, that is bad enough; but it is quite another

thing to then be told by the agents of that oppression "be patient, we will do better tomorrow." The question will cross your mind just for a moment: "You will do *what* better tomorrow?" No, no, the militancy and the vitality that I heard in the music here today comes from the kind of energy which allows you, which in fact forces you to examine everything, taking nothing for granted. To say that it has been this way for the last two hundred years but that it will *not* be this way for the next five minutes. That if, for example, you don't think you can work in the Democratic Party, you don't have to. There are other things. It is a vitality in short which allows you to believe, to act on the belief that it is *your* country and your responsibility to your country is to *free it*, and to free it you have to *change it*.

Americans are the youngest country, the largest country and the strongest country, we like to say and yet the very notion of change, *real* change throws Americans into a panic and they look for any label to get rid of any dissenter. A country which is supposed to be built on dissent, built on the value of the individual, now distrusts dissent at least as much as any totalitarian government can and debases the individual in many ways because it places security and money above the individual and when these things are cultivated and honored in the country, no matter what else it may have, it is in danger of perishing because no country can survive, it *cannot* survive without a patient, active responsibility for all its citizens. This country now, in terms of its politicians always seems to feel: "it is out of our hands"; "we can't do anything." A country which has no objective need to do so is always talking about the lesser-of-two-evils. I hope you see what I am trying to suggest. I am trying to suggest: that in order for me as a black citizen of this country to begin to be a free man here, in order for that to happen, a great many other things have to happen. I cannot be, even if I wanted to be, fitted into the social structure as it now stands; there is no possibility of opening it up to let me in. In the very same way, in the deep south, Christian churches do not have many Christians in their congregations and when I move into the congregation, and when the church itself embraces all Christians, the church will have had to change.

In order for us to survive and transcend the terrible days ahead of us, the country will have to turn and take me in its arms. Now this may sound mystical, but at bottom that is what has got to happen because it is not a matter of *giving me* this or that; it is not yours to give me. Let us be clear about that. It is not a question of whether

they are going to give me any freedom. I am going to take my freedom. That problem is resolved. The real problem is the price. Not the price I will pay, but the price the country will pay. The price a white woman, man, boy and girl will have to pay in themselves before they look on me as another human being. This metamorphosis is what we are driving toward because without that we will perish, indeed we are almost perishing now.

Internal dissension in this country has had a terrifying effect all over the world, because we are locked in civil war. Now, some of the changes which begin to achieve the liberation of a country have to be awkward and disturbing, and just think about one single aspect of this problem—jobs and freedom. The economy cannot employ all of its white people. And in my view one of the reasons for this (and I am deliberately not talking about the fantastic nuclear situation which is costing so much money), one of the reasons for this is that a great deal of the energy of this economy goes into creating things that nobody needs and nobody wants and everybody buys. Nobody needs a new car every year, and it doesn't really matter what kind of toothpaste you use, you know; these things are not important and in order for me to get a job we have to have ways of getting everybody a job and we are not going to do it the way we are doing it now. That's a fact! And as for freedom, I will tell you what I know about freedom, and you will think I don't have any political sense. I know that James Foreman, for example, and many of the students he leads, are much, much freer than most of the white people I know in this country. For that matter, I am too. The reason is, I think, the reason is that in order to be free—let's look some facts of your life in the face—you have to look into yourself and know *who you are*—at least know who you are and decide what you want or at least what you will *not* have; and will *not* be; and take it from there. People are as free as they wish to become. If one thinks of Americans in this way, freedom is used here as a synonym for comfort. People think they are free because they don't have a military machine oppressing them; but one of the simplest ways to lose freedom is to stop fighting for it and stop respecting it. And when it goes that way, something much worse happens, I think: when freedom goes that way it completely vanishes and nobody cares. Chaos takes its place rather like what we watched in Germany and again this is going to be a horrible example. I still believe when a country has lost all human feeling, you can do anything to anybody and justify it and we do know that in this country we have done just that. The nature of our crisis then, it seems to

me, is that those of us who will not live unless we can be free make this known. The events, the terrible events of the last days has done nothing to alter this determination. In fact, if one had been undecided or uncertain before, about what it meant to try to liberate one's self in this country, one is undecided no longer because now we have seen with our own eyes the danger we are in. We have seen with our own eyes what happens to a society when it allows itself to be ruled by the least able and the most abject among us. We have seen what happens when the word "democracy" is taken to be a synonym for mediocrity; is not taken to mean to raise all of its members to the highest possible level, but on the contrary to reduce such members as aspire to excellence down to the lowest common denominator.

We have begun to see what happens to a country when it is run according to the rules of a popularity contest, we have begun to see that we ourselves are far more dangerous for ourselves than Khrushchev or Castro. What we do not know about our black citizens is what we do not know about ourselves; and what we do not know about ourselves is what we do not know about the world—and the world knows it. Nothing can save us, not all our money, nor all our bombs, nor all our guns if we cannot achieve that long, long, long delayed maturity.

FREEDOM

I have risen
With the swiftness
Of a sparrow into flight.
I have washed away
The crusty staleness
Of oppression.
And it flows from me
Like joyous tears
To mingle with the dust
Of the past.
I taste the soft sweetness
Of renewed liberty,
And as the darkness yields
To the dawn,
Truth
Breaks the bonds
Of slavery.

WALTER MOORE